

De-Fantasizing the Profession and Re-Publicizing Cinemas or Holding on to the Real  
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I would like to thank the executive council for inviting me to speak here today at this plenary.

For two decades, I have taught in a four year undergraduate program dedicated primarily to teaching and professional film production, two categories which summon some profound debates perhaps better left for another gathering.

Let me first state what I will not do, just to clear some space because I have a different starting point. I will not elaborate on shifts in paradigms or research models. I will not propose a new theory which should incinerate the old ones. I will not discuss the institutions we labor in as sites of professional identification. I will not assert what we should write about. One look at this incredibly large, diverse conference indicates the impossibility of defining any dominant discourse.

What is the State of the Profession in the 21st century? All of these words trouble me: state, profession, 21st, century. Perhaps we hold on to this concept of professional orderliness because the whole field is vaporizing. It is difficult to map the field because our locations have expanded. We teach cinema everywhere: in film schools, communications, health schools, arts, humanities, engineering, nursing, and medical schools. More books on the marginal areas of cinema studies--documentary, experimental, unknown histories, digital work, national cinemas, race, gender--are published than ever before. All of this combustion is exhilarating.

The word "state" worries me: it infers an equilibrium that I find problematic within the context of the genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Chechnya, Amidou Diallo, and other shootings in our country. It feels too static, too grand, too universal, too limiting, not fluid and mobile enough. I don't like the word "field" if it means marking off borders for cinema studies whose very libidinal economy is based on its outsider academic status, its pleasures in watching, its fluidities and disorders. If we belong to anything at all, I hope it is to join a struggle to insure that cinema, as Salman Rushdie has said once about literature, "argues with the world."

The term "profession" poses two problems. On the one hand, the word profession creates a hierarchy of skills and status excluding those deficient in theory, method, criticism, history, publications. I worry about any edifice whose epistemological structure banks on inclusions and exclusions, official languages, standards, criteria, normative values. These strategies are deadly.

On the other hand, the word "professional" has functioned as camouflage. "Professional" film, the kind of training that exploits the very real fears of parents and students about post-baccalaureate employment and health insurance, has become rampant. While those messy sites of argument and contention called the humanities are deteriorating, instrumental education that performs worker training for transnational media corporations has accelerated. Curriculum, courses, and programs that show students how, but not why, are increasing like the plague of

fantasies, those images which blur one's clear reasoning, as Slavoj Zizek writes.

Remember that Hollywood male fantasy, *Field of Dreams*, where Kevin Costner was informed, if you build it, they will come? Many programs invert that adage and claim: if they want it, give it to them. The courses most frequently offered in distance learning schemes quite clearly materialize the end of the humanities. In their digitalization, they signal the end of those messy, disorderly in-class discussions where there is no right or wrong way to interpret Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* or Carma Hinton's *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, or Martin Arnold's *Piece Touchée*, or Fina Torres *Celestial Clockwork*.

As for the words "21st" and "century," our inner historians should cry out for better periodization. For many of us across the academy and outside of it, the new century started in 1989. The Berlin Wall came down. The Tiananmen Square protests were brutally squashed. The fatwa against Rushdie ensued. The arts were aggressively defunded. A war against cultural difference was launched by neo conservatives against queers, women, and people of color making media. And the first wave of media mega mergers that vanquished public space unfurled. Deadly nationalism, both in our own country and abroad, killed and maimed millions.

These histories should also help us to find our bearings as we navigate cinema in our research, in our classrooms, in our public lives. These events push us resolutely towards arguing with the world. Trinh T. Minh Ha encourages us to look at the spaces in-between, the intervals. Right now, it is impossible to imagine being anywhere else than in the interval: any other place seems too fixed, too national, too simple, too white, too american, too male, too straight.

We should all oppose mapping out anything that is not collective in organization, passionately collegial in purpose, and generous in execution. If anything, my intuition is that there is far too much "me" in our field these days, and far too little "we." There is far too much competition, and far too little creativity. We need a less defined field. We need much more "organized chaos," as Tim Murray puts it, or more "unsettledness and rewiring" as Zillah Eisenstein frames it. A politics and strategy of disorderly order makes more sense now.

What is absolutely exciting about cinema studies, which I now define as any moving image--film, video, cd rom, the web, installations--is its glossolalia, its ability to speak in tongues, as we used to say in Catholic school. It means possession by ideas. It means explosions into some passionate public space that moves you outside yourself. Cinema can do that. It puts you in conversation with things bigger than you or your pathologies. It is an occupying force that emanates from within but connects you to the world. Speaking in tongues means moving beyond all borders.

When I survey cinema studies after 20 years of teaching and writing, I see much more speaking in tongues than ever before. When I was in graduate school, we waged bloodthirsty civil wars between marxism and psychoanalysis, between theory and practice, between experimental and documentary. Today, these wars seem quaint arid tame when public culture has gone underground. Few public spaces for cinemas survive outside the market economy. Yet, weirdly, our discipline is a joyous cacophony of methods, models, theories, content areas, practices. It has moved from binary oppositions and civil wars into a more pluralized and inclusive speaking in tongues. But now, the war is much bigger and perhaps more lethal.

Moving images matter. Cinema studies has morphed into a worm on a rusty hook to help the embattled humanities endure. In some ways, this ribald heterogeneity depends upon a fantasmatic that critical film analysis matters somehow. Yet the repressed infrastructures of higher education everywhere are like the Titanic without James Cameron's digital effects. We are sinking into a cold ocean of transnational corporatization, efficiency, and mutations into a service economy.

Despite email, faculty retreats, book and journal launches, and conferences such as this, most of my colleagues around the country--of all different theoretical and political stripes--feel alone, under attack, fighting for space, angry, marginalized, overworked, exhausted.

These beloved colleagues remind me of a multicultural Knights of the Round table. They launch quests for what is right and what is just. They joust at almost every turn without armor and without reinforcements. They engage in epic battles--almost always devalued as insignificant--about teaching load, rental budgets, new degree programs, the place for critical work. It seems everyone wonders if there is anyone else who thinks or speaks like they do. And almost everyone I speak with tells me that email, life in that bodiless virtual fast lane, is simply not enough. They delete more than they reply these days.

Most of us work under these conditions of seige. The Camelots of higher education and cinema studies are repeatedly pelted by a wide, devious variety of assault weapons: distance learning, work speed ups, part timer labor, budget cutbacks. I have yet to unearth anyone who does not have a fantasy in place that gets them through the ripped films, the depleted rental budgets, bitter faculty meetings, or the lack of a full time tenure track job.

Everyone seems occupied with the same repetition fetish: a better job at a more prestigious institution. This job, of course, includes the following: less teaching load, more research support, more salary, more respect, more intellectuality, better students, less professionalization, less backbiting, and finally, more adoration.

While I am not one who believes in adopting socialist realism for my fantasy life, I would argue that these fantasies are symptomatic of trauma. They suggest that our rewards should come from some institutional heaven outside of ourselves, rather than from the collectivities across borders that we remake daily as a matter of psychic and political survival. This fantasy allows us to pretend that where we are does not matter, and what we do daily is a minor narrative that does not count.

Recently, a few incidents which speak of a larger crises in film culture emerged. I participated in an on-line forum on the state of non profit film exhibition hosted by the National Association for Media Arts and Culture, that noble group of non profit media centers that perhaps represents the front lines of our discipline. Participants wrote about precipitously declining audiences for radical, edgy work in all genres and a creeping commercialization necessary to simply survive. On another listserv for film archives, one curator queried how to get unknown cinemas out to audiences and academics. Then I attended a Women Make Movies board meeting where one board member asked why professors rent feminist films. Someone from marketing replied,

faculty *only* rent what gets written on, so most of the fabulous, gutsy collection goes unrented and unseen. Aboard member from the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, flourishing for nearly half a century, asked me if film academics really cared about cinema anymore. He perceived theorizing was increasingly disconnected from film culture, a loss to all. These episodes underscore that public spaces for film culture have been eaten away, as though deer had invaded our garden and chewed all the rhododendrons leaves, one by one.

I offer you these anecdotes to suggest that maybe our sense of isolation and loneliness could be remedied--and our political resolve energized--if we transgressed the borders of academia a little more. We need to stretch beyond the confines of the academy into the other realms of film culture. The despair in most of those media arts sectors, including our own, is almost overwhelming. It is as though some monster is sucking out the oxygen and then cramming us into one very tiny, tiny room with no windows.

However, in many ways, we are living through one of the most exciting and complicated periods with new technologies, new challenges, new media art and artists, and new ways of thinking boiling up all around us. So perhaps our angst could be retooled into a passionate courage to move beyond the academy. We need to forge life sustaining and empowering alliances with these vast, energetic and struggling non profit media arts sectors and media artists across the globe. The transnational media sector are those ogres in the fairy tales my son Sean loves: they don't need our help to rule their empires.

But this labyrinthine non-profit sector--museums like Pacific Film Archive, archives like the Japanese American National Museum, media arts centers like Anthology Film Archives and Street Level Media, distributors like Women Make Movies, Canyon Cinema, California Newsreel, film festivals and artists--actually need us. They need us to produce the people who keep these public spaces alive. They need us to be audiences. They need us to write about the works they discover. They need us to screen the new gutsy work by artists of difference. And if we don't have budgets for public exhibition, it is our job to find the money. We desperately need this media arts realm so we can hold on to the real in the midst of the virtual.

As intellectuals, we should never lose that spirit which Erik Barnouw has called "an open sense of the marvelous." Maybe we should all be a little more like Erik, who at 92 is still scrutinizing new work by artists one/fifth his age.

I want to end this talk with a wish list, not to conclude or sum up, but to open up some public space, some marvelous, messy and disorderly space, for all of us here to occupy. I have ten wishes:

1. An anti racist, feminist and pluralized politics becomes the foundation for all that we do and think and show.
2. The end of all categories: national, international, documentary, experimental, narrative, film, video, television, digital. Pluralize cinema into cinemas!
3. Tenure line jobs for everyone. An end to the maquiladora system developing for emerging scholars
4. An end to careerism and individualism. In its place, a sense of generosity of spirit, collectivity

of intellect and shared purpose.

5. Larger rental budgets for everyone, and programming budgets to invite to our campuses more media artists-the true vanguard of theory

6. To take back the term “convergence” from AOL/Time Warner. To work instead towards a radicalized convergence between scholars, artists, and the media arts communities

7. To take back public spaces from commercial interests so those films, ideas, and people who are unseen and unheard can be seen, and heard

8. A disorderly order, where everyone is always displaced yet always in solidarity across borders

9. To teach, write and program to unsettle the universe. Restore the dialectic between history and the future!

10. To speak in tongues--marvelously-- with courage and with passion.